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THE HIGH SCHOOL DEBATING LEAGUE.

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EDWARD E. McDERMOTT.

Debate is desirable under proper conditions because it develops fluency in the use of English. It is not denied that other subjects can be so used as to accomplish the same result. History—especially when the topic method is freely used—English Literature, and even Geometry are so used in a few schools. But these schools are exceptions. Without any intention of reflecting upon methods of instruction, it is safe to assert the possibility of a child passing from the primary through the university without giving any special attention to oral English. During a large part of his course he is pleasantly entertained by fluent teachers and lecturers. There is no doubt that they get splendid practice out of it, but how about the student? He sits in the back seat and is expected to listen attentively. He is allowed to answer, in fragmentary and ungrammatical English, an occasional question addressed to him. So popular has the lecture become that, Lorenzo like, the average student is in danger of forgetting the sound of his own tongue. If at the end of his sixteen years of study, he has some ability to talk straight while thinking and think straight while talking it has been unconsciously absorbed,—it is the result of accident, not design.

It may be urged that out of school hours children are constantly talking among themselves and with their parents and in this way they secure sufficient practice. Admitted. They are constantly practicing. But this constant practice without criticism or supervision only serves to fix more firmly their many mistakes. The price they pay to get rid of these mistakes later is both interest and principal compounded quarterly. If this seems to be an exaggeration, put the matter to a practical test. Ask the next child you meet to direct you to some place, on the opposite side of the city. Never mind about the place, but notice carefully his clearness, fluency, sentence structure and grammar.

In this connection it should not be forgotten that there is no time quite so opportune for securing an easy and accurate use of English as the years spent in high school. Psychologists tell us that the correct and fluent use of our native tongue is largely a mental habit, and the easiest time to form this habit is under the age of twenty. Few people become good extempore speakers after twenty-five—none after thirty.

The question for every educator to ask is just this—Is it worth while, is it worth the extra time and labor it costs, to be able to express one's ideas clearly and in good English? If the question is answered in the affirmative, then it must be admitted that at the proper time and under the proper conditions, debate is desirable, because there is no other subject in our course of study that is so specifically aimed at the fluent use of mother tongue as debate.

Debate develops ability to think before an audience. This ability does not come by theorizing nor by chance. It comes by practice. It is not denied that it can be acquired out of school and before the public, but in most such cases, both the speaker and the public are to be pitied. The school is the workshop for all such efforts; there, blunders are expected, excused and corrected. Before the public, they are not, and every speaker who practices on the public pays in the loss of reputation a high price for a painful experience.

Debate develops skill to sift material,—a sense of proportion. In other words, it develops judgment. The student who is preparing for debate cannot read with his brain in a stupor. It is not sufficient for him merely to understand what he reads as it is in other studies. He must weigh, compare, discriminate, retain the important and discard the unimportant. Thus his judgment is constantly called to pass upon material, all of which may be truthful but which differs in weight.

Closely allied to this point is skill in the arrangement of the material. It is not sufficient to sift the matter read and secure a number of important points. These points must be arranged logically. Link by link, they must be welded into a perfect chain. Step by step, they must carry the judges on to conviction.

Nor is the ability which debate develops to condense material of less importance than the two points just mentioned. "Boil it down" is the war-cry of the debater. In one of our intercollegiate debates last year, three of our University students read, by careful estimate, 15,000 pages of solid literature. Any one of these students could easily have talked half a day on his division of the subject but he must prove his case in twelve minutes or fail. Again and again in these debates, students would be almost willing to sell their birthright for a minute more, but twelve minutes for constructive argument, and five minutes for rebuttal, is the unalterable rule. Any one who watches these students as day after day they "boil down" and discard argument after argument, which at first seemed to them to be vital, until at last they have the bare skeleton of their argument, cannot doubt that they are getting vigorous mental discipline.

Skill in original research and the use of the library is a necessary part of the training of every educated man. Debate, more than anything else, develops the student along these lines. It prompts him to correspond and seek interviews with those who are familiar with his proposition. It is one of the first subjects in school that teaches the student the free use of the library. Under its stimulus, he soon learns to go everywhere and search everything for material.

It is said that a good lawyer does not always know the law, but he always knows where to find it. If this is so, the good debater is more than the good lawyer for he not only knows where to find the law but he knows the law and how to use it.

Debate develops self-reliance and courage of conviction. The man who has opinions and is not afraid to express them is likely to be a better citizen than the man who has opinions and is afraid to express them, for fear he may differ from some one and get into a heated discussion. The man who is in the habit of expressing his opinions at the proper time and place on subjects which concern him always stands somewhere and you know exactly where to find him. The man who, though he has opinions, never expresses them and always agrees with you, is the most tedious and uninteresting of all mankind. The "yes"—"yes"—"yes" man is like a mud fort. Napoleon once said he would rather turn his guns upon anything than a mud fortification. He never could tell when it was reduced.

Debate develops courtesy to opponents. When the ignorant, the untrained man, enters into a discussion, he becomes angry and wants to fight at once. Every one who differs from him is his enemy and should be thrashed. It takes a great deal of training to enter into a serious argument to become angry, to give and take hard blows and yet to be a gentleman. The fist fights which have disgraced our United States senate—rarely, it is fortunate—prove the truth of this assertion.

Debate develops the habit of studying with care both sides of a question. It is true that the debater cannot always sit on the fence and play the part of a judge. Sooner or later he must accept one side or the other and become an advocate. But before doing so, he looks over the whole field carefully. He anticipates the argument which his opponent must present and

prepares to meet it. This very habit of deliberation prevents snap shot judgments, jumping to conclusions, and develops a judicial turn of mind as well as power to advocate.

Cribbing is a common evil in schools. The notorious case of the Andover students seeking admission to Princeton University is still fresh in our minds. No school is wholly exempt. No study escapes. But it is a most pernicious and persistent habit in English composition and one that taxes the ingenuity of the average teacher to cope with. Every principal must have observed the marked tendency which some, often many of his students have, to crib their composition, if not all the time, at least on special and great occasions. Take a typical case. Commencement is approaching. The Senior class is small. Every one is expected to appear on the program. Every one promptly begins a nervous search for a subject and for material. Encyclopedias, antiquated books and dusty magazines are the chief treasure houses. The more timid speakers, less experienced writers and less scrupulous students will sometimes copy almost the entire essay from a single article. The more experienced and more conscientious will select a sentence from this source and a paragraph from that and glue the whole together with an occasional sentence of their own. The result is frequently startling to say the least. It looks more like a "crazy-quilt" than like a composition. Who is to blame? Perhaps nobody. Certainly not the poor, abused and ambitious children. They have had almost no training in expression, oral or written. The occasion is a great one and they are anxious to appear at their best. They recognize at once that the literary style of the magazine and the encyclopedia is smoother than their own and they yield to the temptation. Perhaps the teacher is not to blame. Such a thing as a good course in practical English has not existed in his school. The course already mapped out consumes all the time of himself and his assistants and that course must be "gone through with" at all hazards. The School Board expects it and the higher institutions demand it for entrance. But commencement essays by the girls and orations by the boys are time-honored exercises which cannot be discontinued with impunity. Hence, a demand is made upon the student which he is not prepared to meet.

But let us come to the remedy. Suppose the high school student has really learned to debate by the time he reaches his senior year. He is not afraid of his own ideas. He knows how to sift material and arrange it in effective form. When called before his teacher, he can give an outline of what he intends to write and extemporize on it for ten or fifteen minutes, if desirable. Such a student will never crib. He has reached a point where it is as great a pleasure for him to express thought as it is to glean it and when expression becomes a pleasure, the student is always guarded against the pernicious and stultifying habit of cribbing. If any teacher has had trouble with cribbing-students let him try forensics and debate. If properly administered, the remedy is guaranteed.

Every man hopes to win victories, but at any rate he is sure to meet with defeat. The man who thinks he can get along without contests forgets that the great law of the survival of the fittest is still in force—never more strenuously than in this age of fierce competition. The man who hopes to get out of contests had better die, and it is not at all certain that he will escape even then. The man who reaches maturity and enters any occupation—teaching, law, medicine, journalism, business, the ministry or what-not—without learning how to take a good hard knock down and benefit by it is to be pitied. When he feels the first shock of actual conflict, he is in great danger. He may sulk in his tent and develop into a first-class pessimist, or he may sneak into the rear and sit there ready to do the bidding of any inferior man who has learned to be a more ready fighter, a more cheerful fighter, and a harder fighter. Life is one continuous debate. The boy who has learned how to accept defeat philosophically, having done

everything honorable to avert it, and then stands up smiling and ready for the next battle, has learned one of the most valuable lessons for practical life that the schools can teach. He is on his way to ultimate success.

Debate is the best—because it is the most practical—form of vocal rhetoricals. Until quite recently, the only effort made to teach vocal rhetoricals in most schools was through the declamation and the recitation. It cannot be denied that the declamation is of very slight educational value. It still has a place but that place is a modest one. It familiarizes the student with bits of good literature, trains his voice, gives him stage presence, and when unaccompanied by too much “agony,” is pleasant enough for his relatives to listen to. But it is only a means to an end and should not be made an end in itself. In so far as it paves the way for the student to express his own thoughts, it is valuable. There it should stop with all except the very few who are fitting themselves to be professional entertainers. When the services of the professional elocutionists have been employed—as they have been too often in the past—to teach children the art of artificiality and egotism, the results have been pitiable and exasperating. It does seem that the best teachers of the state would eagerly embrace the opportunity offered by debate to make their students simple, earnest and natural speakers.

If it is granted, then, that for the foregoing and other reasons, debate is desirable under proper conditions, the next question which confronts us is this: Do the high schools offer the proper conditions for the profitable study of debate? Let us consider this question first from the standpoint of age. It cannot be denied that there is an age under which it is worse than useless to attempt debate—it is time wasted. There may be an occasional precocious child who understands the full force of debate while still in the upper grades, but it is safe to say that the average child does not. The average child may be able to distinguish between exposition and argumentation when the difference is pointed out clearly and illustrated by his teacher. He may be able to select examples from literature placed before him. But when left to his own resources, when asked to construct an argument for himself, he cannot even discriminate between proof and assertion. He constantly uses the latter for the former and it satisfies his mind.

Indeed, until a certain stage of mental development is reached, the distinction is difficult. Abraham Lincoln, the greatest debater of his age, complained of this. He said he could never tell when he had actually proved a proposition until after he had studied Euclid. Even Euclid does not solve the difficulty for a great many students. University students, long after they have mastered Euclid, are quite frequently found who are entirely satisfied that assertion is proof. It is not until well along toward their senior year, and after considerable practice in debate, that they are able to detect readily a weak spot in their own argument and point out one in the argument of their opponents. It was probably not so much the study of Euclid that brought new light to Lincoln in the matter of proof, as it was his arrival at a certain stage of mental development. Consciousness of proof and the study of Euclid was a mere coincidence.

The years which most students spend in the high school are from fourteen to eighteen, and it is probable that somewhere within this period, the average student who has been properly trained begins to realize the full force of debate. It has come to be something definite to him then, although skill and ease are not acquired without some years of practice. The best testimony on this point comes from students themselves and from careful teachers who have given the subject a trial and have observed the results. If we can credit them, we are led to believe that debate is practicable in the high school so far as age is concerned.

But it may be urged that even if all other conditions in the high schools were favorable, there is no time for extra work. It is already a question of

shortening the course, rather than of lengthening it or making it more burdensome by adding to it. Even now it is a question how best to let go something.

In the first place I protest against that attitude which regards everything but the three r's as extra work. Moderate proficiency in spoken English is as essential as arithmetic and much more essential to the average man than Latin or Greek. Granting that the course is already crowded, we believe that almost anything can better be sacrificed than the ability to use effectively in both oral and written expression the knowledge which other subjects give. At best, this knowledge is not and cannot be exhaustive. A drop more or less in the cup of knowledge will scarcely be noticed while the total lack of ability to use it will be keenly felt.

If we admit that under proper conditions, debate is desirable and that the high schools offer proper conditions for its study, it still remains to be shown that interscholastic debate, such as is contemplated by the Minnesota State League, is desirable. In the first place, it makes the schools better acquainted with one another and brings them into healthy rivalry. It cannot be denied that in a few instances, it has brought them into unhealthy rivalry. But these instances are exceptional and it is believed they are unnecessary. The rivalry between universities in intercollegiate debate has sometimes been bitter and undesirable, but the benefits have been so marked, both to students and to universities, that those in charge have struggled to eliminate the objectionable features rather than to throw away both good and bad together. Trouble between universities competing in debate is less serious and less frequent than it was five years ago. It is believed that the high schools will have the same experience and that the machinery of the league, like most machinery, will work with less friction after more use.

One of the most serious ~~menaces to the life and usefulness~~ of the league is the attitude ~~assumed toward it~~ by some superintendents, and as a result, by their schools. It is the victory or death attitude. "Enter the league if you have a winning team. Stay out if you have not!" "It is unbounded honor if you win, overwhelming disgrace if you lose!" Under this impression, the whole school will become keyed up to an undesirable pitch and when defeat comes, as it is almost sure to come soon or late, down go the hopes and ambitions of the whole school. That action and reaction are equal, is a law not of the physical world alone. Viewing the work of last year kindly but critically, this mistake was made in a few cases. It seems to the writer that those who assumed this attitude have entirely misconceived the purpose of the state league. Its purpose is not to determine what can be done by special effort on a special occasion, not to concentrate the whole nervous force of the school upon one grand event once a year. This has been stated so often within the past year that its repetition would seem unnecessary. Spasmodic effort accomplishes but little in any line. It is the systematic, steady work that counts. The true attitude, the scholarly attitude is one of moderation. By this, it must not be understood that indifference is counselled. Indifference is death to all kinds of school work. Whatever is worth doing at all is worth doing well, and, in debate especially, deep conviction and vigorous support are essential. The successful trainer has a firm hold on his team and on his school. He urges that every effort consistent with good work in other studies be put forth to win. When defeat comes he urges that it be accepted manfully. Does some one answer that this is a beautiful ideal, but after all a mere ideal? No, it is not. It is the attitude assumed by most of our schools last year, be it said to their credit, and it is the attitude assumed by most of them this year.

The interscholastic contest brings school work, not debate alone, but all school work, into public notice, and it is believed that publicity is as good for schools as it is for trusts.

By comparing standards, the interscholastic debates unify the work

throughout the state and tend to bring all the schools up to the same high plane. It is probably true that the schools which are most anxious to enter the league are least in need of its assistance. They already have good practical courses in English and it is little or no extra work for them to get ready for the contests. But it is hoped that their good work will stimulate the schools which are giving little or no attention to English of a practical kind.

It is sometimes urged that anything which creates so much excitement has a disorganizing, demoralizing effect on a school. Let us examine this point for a moment. The main volume of energy in any school is easily directed into the channels of regular study. It need not be taken into account in a consideration of discipline. But there is always a little surplus that cannot be dissipated in the regular way. Mankind—and childkind—is so constituted that this surplus calls for some extraordinary outlet. The successful disciplinarian knows this and consciously or unconsciously provides for its escape in the least harmful way. Take a familiar illustration. When a room becomes restless from excess of nervous energy, a skillful teacher will tell or read a good story, secure a hearty laugh, clear the atmosphere and go on. When excessive physical energy is the cause of the disturbance, three minutes' physical culture will accomplish the same result and enable the work to move on again under favorable conditions. The unsuccessful disciplinarian tries to suppress this disturbing element by main force and fails, of course, for it can no more be suppressed than a live spring can be smothered by throwing earth upon it. Suppressed energy reappears in the form of mischief.

The whole school is not very different from the individual room—it is merely an aggregate of rooms. This surplus energy is present from the primary to and through the university. President Northrup says that the difficulty of disciplining a large university has decreased fifty per cent since the introduction of football and other college athletics. We have all observed that hazing and other "smart" college pranks have almost entirely disappeared in recent years. Fortunate, indeed, is the disciplinarian who can direct this excess of energy along lines which are beneficial—who can utilize waste.

It is contended in this paper that debate is sufficiently different from other studies to constitute an attractive diversion. It is a rest and relief from other work. The interscholastic debate is a topic of popular and enthusiastic conversation for some time before and after it occurs. There is not another diversion in school life except football that is more absorbing than debate. Indeed, some danger lies in this very fact. It may act as a disorganizing influence unless kept under control. But in the hands of a skillful teacher it becomes a safety valve for the escape of surplus energy. Through its influence, loyalty and pride in the local school may be stimulated and unity secured.

If a superintendent finds from actual experience that he is not able to make practical use of this surplus energy, if he finds that he cannot secure desirable results except by protecting his students from all forms of excitement, if he finds that he must rear them in a sort of hot-house intellectual atmosphere, then he should certainly not permit his school to enter the league because it is likely to produce some enthusiasm in his school. No teacher is under obligation to undertake what he cannot accomplish. But he must not complain if his hot-house flowers wither when they meet the rude blasts of competition in after life, and he must not complain and try to hold back the superintendent who can make practical use of enthusiasm in the good order and discipline of his school.

It was urged when the league was organized a year ago that the expense would be too great. So far as reported there was not a single district nor a single school left with a debt on its hands last year. All purchased considerable material for reading and many schools were able to lay aside

a fund for future use. There is nothing succeeds like success and from a financial standpoint the league was certainly a success last year.

It was also urged that the meagre library facilities and smaller teaching force of the country high schools would act as a decided handicap and give these schools but little chance to win. A large library is a decided advantage in many ways. But does any one presume that the high school student can make use of all that is written on a really broad debatable question? Up to a certain point, material is valuable; beyond that point, it confuses the immature student. It snows him under, befogs him, smothers him. A few leading articles that will give him a firm hold on the underlying principles, and facts enough so that his argument may not seem thin, are sufficient. This is better than more. The student can better afford to spend extra time in a thorough mastery of presentation, than in going over material long after he has the main points of his debate well in mind. At this stage of development, presentation is very important. Let the student get a point clearly in mind. Let him present it in different language every day for a week, striving each day for a clearer, simpler, more concise, and more earnest presentation, and he will easily pass his opponent whose mind is burdened by a mass of undigested material and who from lack of practice has neither a clear nor strong delivery. So that after all, the advantage of a large library—to the high school student at least—is more apparent than real. From two dollars to five dollars will generally secure as much material as can be used to advantage in high school debate. It is a very small school indeed that cannot afford to put \$5.00 into reading material for a year's debate.

The smaller teaching force in the country high school may be a more serious handicap. The writer is not so well prepared to speak on this subject, but he suspects that the larger number of students and teachers in our largest schools makes it possible for the principle of division of labor to be applied more successfully in the latter. ~~But on these two points, library facilities and teaching force, experience is the most convincing form of argument.~~ The smaller schools won out in the league last year. Whether this was through luck or through more careful preparation is not the purpose of this paper to discuss. It is certain that if they had not won, plenty of people would have been ready to say that inadequate library facilities and insufficient teaching force was the cause. Under a certain age children should not attempt debate at all. They are not mentally equipped for it. Similarly it may be argued that under a certain size, high schools should not attempt interscholastic debate. They should be satisfied because of their smaller numbers and smaller teaching force to derive what benefit they can from purely local contests. Just where the dividing line lies between the school that is too small and the school that is large enough to undertake interscholastic contests to advantage, must be left to the discretion and good sense of the principal. No hard and fast rule can be laid down.

It has been suggested that the school winning state championship has to enter too many contests. Last year, the winner participated in five, although there were twenty-six schools in the league. If this is too many contests it would be possible to so arrange the league as to reduce the number; but if the contests are begun early enough it is not believed that one contest a month will be burdensome, especially when the same subject is used throughout the series.

The difficulty of securing competent and unbiased judges was one of the most perplexing and unsatisfactory features of the work of the league last year. Although new to the high schools it is not really a new or recent difficulty. The universities have been struggling with the same problem for some years and still it is only partially solved.

They have learned two important lessons, at least. First, select judges with great care. Second, abide courteously by the decision, no matter how

unfair it may seem. The "knocker" is generally regarded as a "sorehead," no matter how just his cause may be.

When a fair question is about equally well argued on both sides an unprejudiced audience will be about equally divided between the affirmative and negative. There is always room for this honest difference of opinion. It is natural and desirable in everything—except possibly in debate when the majority doesn't happen to be on your side. What does a man generally mean when he begins to talk boisterously about an "unfair" decision? He means simply that a fair decision must agree with his particular views. The same reasoning carried a little further would make a fair decision agree with everybody's particular views, and this is manifestly an absurdity. The moral is, select your judges with care and then don't "jump on them" and argue the question all over with them if you happen to differ. It may be allowable to mob the umpire and engage in a free for all at a baseball game but such conduct is hardly in keeping with the dignity of debate.

After all, the decisions rendered in these debates are about as fair as those handed down from courts of law. Absolute justice is an ideal not attainable in earthly matters. As Justice Lewis, of the supreme court, said last year in regard to one of these debates, "All such decisions are at best only approximations."

It has been suggested that while local debate in the high school is desirable, interscholastic debate is a dangerous nervous strain to young students; that it demands excessive time of the teacher for the benefit of a few students; that it demands excessive time of these students and results in the neglect of other studies. The high school presenting such an argument makes a frank confession of the weakness of its course in practical English. If the school is as weak as this would indicate, it certainly ought not to enter the league and no one who understood the situation would urge it to do so. It should be said right here that not a single school of this kind has ever been urged to enter the league. If a debating team ~~has to be worked up each year from the raw material of any~~ school, it makes no difference whether the school is large or small, all the above objections will hold good. But is this low standard of English necessary or justifiable in our schools, even our smaller schools? The superintendents can answer better than the writer.

The state league presumes that the high schools are willing to grant a modest place to spoken English and can afford the time to do so. Suppose now that such a course is installed. Suppose that the aim of this course is to enable every student to stand before his class and tell in a simple and straightforward way what he knows on any subject. Suppose that the course is carefully graded—the simpler exercises, such as declamation, story telling, oratorical analysis and forensics, preceding and paving the way for the most difficult debate. Suppose that the student has had a moderate amount of training in English from the time he entered the high school until he is a senior; that he not only understands theoretically what "exposition" and "argumentation" are, that he can not only identify good specimens of these styles in the works of Webster and Phillips but that he can make good specimens himself. Suppose that when a debatable proposition is given him he has learned how to draw material from every source, arrange it systematically in the form of a simple brief, and stand before his class and present it in reasonably good language. Let us assume this—and the league does assume it—and what becomes of the objections mentioned above. They fall to the ground. The writer has never yet known a thoroughly trained debater who has not found the study to be an exhilarating, delightful stimulus, not a cause for hysteria or nervous prostration. Now if it is admitted that this is not an unreasonable demand to make of the schools—and there are plenty who will admit it for there are plenty of schools which are accomplishing these very results—then what becomes of the argument (1) that the state league demands too much time of the